

ASSESSING THE INVOLVEMENT/DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY AS PART OF THE EUROPEAN INTEGRATION PROCESS OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP STATES

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Introduction

■ In 2003 the European Union (EU) declared itself as “*inevitably a global player*” (Council of the European Union 2003) given the number of its member states, population and GDP. This statement was largely contested due to the fact that the EU was not a single political and military entity. Rather than that, the global level referred to the sum of the interests and capabilities of its member states, this difference being a game changer since rather often the EU proved incapable of reaching a united conclusion regarding a pressing international event. At the empirical level, in 2004 the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was developed, but it quickly generated criticism from both the EU member states and the partner countries (from the Eastern and the Southern neighbourhood), since it envisioned a single top-down approach that was not adaptable to the reality from the ground. Although the EU was and still is a normative power, its model cannot be implemented as it is in any country, since we deal with different historical events, cultures, economic developments, political systems, etc. Thus, in order to be efficient, it needed to be adaptable through a horizontal type of strategy. This criticism reminded the international community about the former Belgian Foreign Minister’s, Mark Eyskens, famous 1991 quote according to which Europe was “*an economic giant, a political dwarf, and a military worm*” (in Leonard 2018). Given the Central-Eastern European waves of enlargement (European Council, Council of European Union-Enlargement 2023)¹, the globalization process and Putin’s claim for an inde-

pendent Russian foreign policy from 2007 during the Munich Security conference² the EU needed to ensure the stability and predictability of its neighbourhood. Hence, the EU decision makers created two new programs: the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) for the Southern region launched in 2008³ and the Eastern Partnership (EaP) for the Eastern one⁴ Even after this differentiation the programs still faced issues regarding the effectiveness. Given the recent events happening in Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, the present research will focus on analysing the EaP partner countries and their integration process considering the civil society development. We have chosen this topic since many of the current analyses focus on the hard security level, bypassing one of the keystones of democratic principles (Popoveniuc 2022), the civil society.

Research methodology

The present paper aims to assess the civil societies' development and involvement as part of the European integration process, within the six EaP countries, between 2011 and 2022. The assessment is based on the principles of evaluation based on criteria, approach that shall be addressed in the upcoming section.

The data source employed is mainly the assessing mechanism used by the European Commission regarding the EAP states, namely the European Integration Index for the Eastern Partnership (named as such up to 2014) and the Eastern Partnership Index starting with 2015. It is not only relevant considering the content, but also a sustainable and credible data source. However, in order to comprehensively assess the development of the civil society there are also included international independent indexes like Freedom House's Freedom of the World 2021 and 2022 Reports.

The criteria set for the assessment are selected considering the hypothesis of the paper, that the more developed the civil society is, the deeper goes the European integration process. Moreover, the quality of each democratic system lays in the existence and involvement of a sustainable civil society, thus the latter is a condition for the existence of the first, and without the first we cannot discuss about any sort of European integration. Thus, for the period of 2011–2014 the analysis focuses on *Participation of civil society* within the Management dimension, since afterwards, the civil society category became an inter-sectorial one. For the period of 2015–2021 we will analyse the Approximation domain, the *Democracy and good governance* category. Within it the following sub-categories will be selected: *Democratic rights and elections, State accountability, Independent media, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of assembly and association, Equal opportunities and non-discrimination and Public administration*. The reason behind this selection lays on the fact that the European integration refers to the alignment towards the European norms and values, among which the rule of law and the quality of the democratic process are leitmotivs. Also, these elements are es-

sential in assessing the CSOs involvement in the internal and external affairs of each state, especially during crises situations like: the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian crisis, the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the Ukrainian war, etc. Unfortunately, there is no data available regarding the above subcategories for 2018–2019, but in order to tackle this limit, we will analyse for the period of 2011–2021 also the Linkage domain since it represents the links between the governments, CSOs, business sector and citizens in the partner countries and the EU member states. Also, we will take into consideration the Progress reports for 20 deliverables for 2020 (European Council, Council of the European Union 2022) (2018, 2019, 2020) that were launched in 2017 paying a special attention to the first cross-cutting deliverable, namely More engagement with civil society organisations.

From a timeframe point of view, the year of 2011 was chosen since it is the first year when the European Integration Index for the Eastern Partnership states was launched in order to measure the progress achieved by each state and the year of 2022 is the year when the Ukrainian war started and both Moldova and Ukraine became candidate countries to the EU, thus officially entering on the European integration path towards a future membership.

The framework of the assessment – a brief literature review on criteria-based evaluation

Throughout the many definitions of evaluation, the one that best fits our needs is that referred to by many authors, that evaluation is to “*value the merit or worth of an entity in a systematic way*” (Alkin 2011: 9). The discipline of evaluation sets the evaluation paradigms throughout five generations, that are set in a chronological order.

The evaluations performed at the beginning of what we consider today as the discipline of evaluation were focused on the decision-making function. This meant that evaluations were used either to legitimize decisions that were already taken, or that they were providing valuable data about the performance of a program, information that influenced the decision of financing the program or not. At this point in the evolution of evaluation as a discipline it is very important that the data provided are accurate, as the discipline was not yet consolidated as a science, and the public still had to validate its means and use. The evaluations are mainly results-oriented, quantitative driven. It was at that point that the criteria-based evaluations made the difference between pre-evaluation and evaluation, as they brought the systematic approach in the process of assessment.

The second generation of evaluations brings to the fore the importance of evaluation use. It is less relevant the act of measuring and the focus on accuracy that was specific to the authors of the first-generation, while it becomes utterly important to perform evaluations that are useful considering the needs of the client (and the clients tend to be more sophisticated in their expectations).

The third generation of evaluations brings us in the realm of evaluating in order to increase the performance of the program. This implies an exhaustive, systematic approach, that links the causalities to the effects and thus constructs the paradigm of change. It is at this point that evaluations based on the theory of the program get to the fore, and remain there up to present. The approach based on the theory of the program implies comparing an ideal model to the reality, thus constructing the paradigm of change and the means to improve the intervention. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are being used, as long as they get to the aimed thorough understanding (Fitzpatrick 2012).

The fourth generation of evaluations is constructed on the premises of the theory of the program, but the focus shifts to constructing the universe of the program (the theory) by considering diverse stakeholders. Thus, the participation of the stakeholders in both constructing the evaluation design and the evaluation process, gets to be of utter importance.

The fifth generation's evaluators further develop the models of the theory of the program scholars, by shifting the focus to the transformation process. The process of evaluating gets to be more important than the results of the evaluation as such, as the process of evaluating can (and should) transform organizations or societies. Within this framework one can find the means for a meaningful gender-based evaluation, or for evaluating for democratization.

However, all the five paradigms co-exist, and nowadays there are performed evaluations specific to all paradigms and generations, without being made value-based distinctions among them. Our assessment can be assimilated to a brief criteria-based evaluation. The criteria-based evaluation is a transversal layer that can be applied to various approaches that are characteristic to different generations of evaluation as well. Our assessment can be placed in between the first and the third generation, making use of the criteria at the operational level. While the focus is mainly on the results (specific to the first generation), there is also being paid attention to the context, and to the causalities, linking broadly the results to the structural elements and the specific elements (Mertens–Wilson 2012: 34–41). Even though the criteria that we chose do assess part of the democratization process/transformation of the societies, the evaluation is not transformational and does not aim to generate change by its own, thus the current assessment should not be understood in the framework of a fifth-generation evaluation.

The criteria can be defined as the attribute used to determine the value or merit of the evaluand. Some evaluators consider the criterial thinking as being at the root of any evaluation, requiring the *“formal expression of goals and performance in terms of generic descriptors”* (Stake 2004: 54–57). However, as expected, the choice of some criteria over others is a subjective process and may determine whether the evaluated program is successful or not. In our case, the choice for the criteria has been made considering the hypothesis of research, namely that a good ranking in civil society participation is correlated with a deeper EU integration (which also implies the adjacent understanding that EU integration can only

be developed in a functional democratic society.

The evaluation questions are being interconnected with the criteria, as listed below:

1. Do the EaP countries register a progressive path in civil society participation?
Linked with the criteria *Civil Society participation, Democratic rights and elections, State accountability, Independent media, Freedom of opinion and expression, Freedom of assembly and association, Equal opportunities and non-discrimination and Public administration*
2. Is there a link between a high level of participation of the civil society and the status of a candidate country?
3. Is the performance of the civil society participation affected by the regional wars?

The purpose of this assessment is to generate know-how, probably the least common of all the evaluation uses, which is mainly characteristic to the academia (Alkin 2011). Thus, the assessment is not expected to produce an immediate outcome, but to be referred to by other experts in the field.

EaP member states – a divided European path

Launched in the aftermath of the Georgian war from 2008 and during the energy competition between Nabucco and South/ North Stream, the EaP (2009) was believed to be a response to the criticism brought against the ENP for having a top down approach centred on a single policy that all partners should implement. The reason behind such a logic would be that the program was dedicated to only six Eastern countries, thus it encompassed a targeted objective on a very specific region. Unfortunately, the empirical dynamics contradicted this logic. Although there were only six partner countries from the same region, their expectations from the EU and their interests could not have been more diverse. On one hand states like Ukraine, Georgia and the Republic of Moldova wanted the program to offer future membership prospects, fact that was not possible, since it was not the objective of the EU regarding EaP. However, it offered the possibility of economic and political integration “*without prejudice to individual partner countries’ aspirations for their future relations with the European Union*” (Council of the European Union 2009). This vague statement put the aforementioned states in a rather difficult position in relation with Russia that considered the initiative as a threat to its area of influence. On the other hand, states like Belarus and Armenia did not have any acknowledged interest in joining the EU in the foreseeable future due to several reasons: Belarus had and still has a close relationship with the Russian Federation, both in political and economic terms, and Armenia did not want to antagonize Moscow since it needed it in order to balance Azerbaijan in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict as it was confirmed in 2020. This statement was later on proved by the fact that

both became part of the Eurasian Union (Eurasian Economic Union 2023). Last, but not least, Azerbaijan traditionally adopted a balancing strategy between the East and the West using the energy card (IEA 2023) that provided a certain level of independence. From an economic point of view, Moldova was dependent on the Russian market and gas, and so was Ukraine. The difference between the two resided on the fact that Ukraine was an energy hub, fact that provided important leverage at the negotiating table. From a social point of view, Moldova was and still is a rather fragmented society that was not constant regarding its European path (The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index 2022a). This lack of persistency was somehow dealt with after 2022 when the Ukrainian war started and the EU was seen as a viable option due to the fear that Russia would also invade Moldova. The same situation could have been seen in Ukraine before 2022 (The Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index 2022b).

At the level of incentives, the EaP offered both a bilateral and multilateral approach, the first one concentrating on the possibility of signing Association Agreements (AA) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTA) that lead to gradual integration of the partner countries into the EU economy, but also on other areas like mobility, security, social development, etc. (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council COM 823 final 2008). Three out of the six partner countries signed AA with the EU: Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine bringing them to a higher level of economic integration in relation with the European structures (European Union External Action 2022). At the same time, this did not have a spill-over effect over other domains and did not respond to the security needs of those countries. Rather than that, it attracted a higher level of criticism from the Russian side and culminated with the emergence of the Ukrainian war. Coming back to the topic of the paper, faced with hard security issues (annexation of Crimea from 2014, Nagorno–Karabakh war from 2020, Russian economic blockade against the Moldavian imports, and the war from 2022) the EaP states reacted differently in terms of involvement and development of their civil societies as it can be seen in the forthcoming analysis. These fluctuating behaviours affected the governance quality which in turn affected their European integration process as it will furtherly be seen.

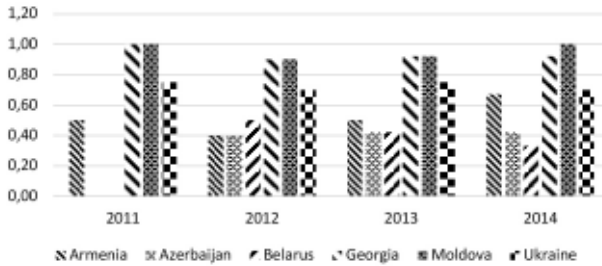
Civil societies in EaP states: 10 years of progressive and regressive behaviours

As already stated, without an active civil society a state cannot reasonably have a functioning democratic system, and without a functioning democratic system a state cannot achieve a high level of European Integration, be it a candidate country or not, since this is one of the fundamental norms of the EU.

In order to be able to have an accurate image over the involvement of CSOs, we firstly analysed the EaP indexes from 2011 until 2021 for each EaP state, by comparing the scores for the chosen categories and subcategories that each partner state

registered on a scale from 0 (being the lowest) and 1 (being the highest). This comparative and longitudinal analysis is fundamental for identifying and characterising the behaviour of each country regarding its civil society in crisis versus non crisis situations. It is equally important to see if a state follows a progressive path, or rather if it follows a regressive one when faced with security issues (be them economic, political, military in their nature).

Figure 1. Participation of civil society in EaP states 2011–2014



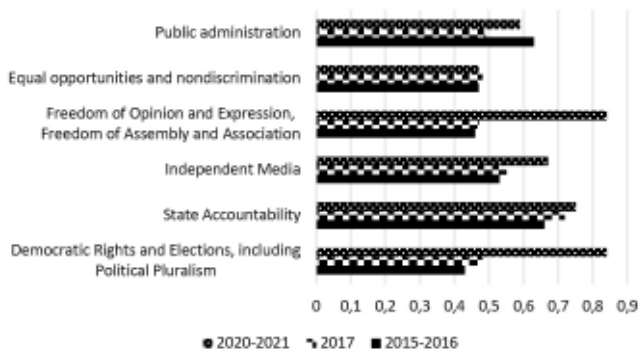
Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Integration Indexes for Eastern Partnership countries conducted by Open Society and International Renaissance Foundations available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 December 2022

As previously mentioned, for the period of 2011–2014, the Index envisioned a special category for CSOs participation in the EaP societies. Analysing the above chart, we can see that the Republic of Moldova and Georgia are scoring in some years 1 out of a maximum of 1, revealing a high participation rate of CSOs in both states, with some fluctuations in 2012 and 2013. Also, although there was a small difference, Georgia was on a slight regressive path from 1 in 2011 to 0.92 in 2014. At the same time, Ukraine was rather constant from 0.75 to 0.70, Armenia on a progressive path from 0.5 in 2011 to 0.67 in 2014. Azerbaijan, although not reaching the median level, still was on a progressive path from 0 (with a practical non-existent active civil society) to 0.42, as it was also the case of Belarus (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). Since the annexation of Crimea occurred in 2014 and to some degree it affected all six states, but of course mainly Ukraine, we could claim that the Russian threat did not affect in a negative way the quality of the civil society and thus neither the integration process for states like Moldova or Ukraine. But given the events from Ukraine regarding the Euromaidan in the West, the pro-Russian protests in the East, the Crimean annexation, the fraud scandal in Moldova (Reuters 2020), the pressures that Russian put on those states, the social fragmentation of the population, the EU leaders decided that the program needed a structural reform, since the index did not transparently reflected the partners' domestic dynamics. Starting with 2015 the index stopped discussing about the integration (by changing its name), thus, eliminating a direct causal link between the program and a possible pre-acceding strategy, and went into a more in-depth

analysis regarding the indicators that the partner countries need to achieve in order to reach a high level of European integration. It is worth mentioning that reaching this level would not automatically turn a state into a candidate country. Even if this situation is achieved, this does not guarantee a possible membership, but this is a different topic of discussion that does not fall under the topic of this paper. Thus, moving to the period of 2015–2021, when the civil participation was included as an inter-sectorial category, we analysed each state from the selected categories’ point of view, as it follows:

Armenia. As it can be seen below, this state registered a huge boost in terms of *Democratic Rights and Elections, including Political Pluralism and Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Freedom of Assembly and Association* sub-categories going from 0.43 in 2015 to 0.84 in 2021 for the first and from 0.46 to 0.84 for the second during the same period of time (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). It is worth mentioning that this boost happened during the 2020–2021 timeframe, thus during the Nagorno–Karabakh war pinpointing towards a rather robust and active civil society especially during crisis situations. Also, another important aspect is represented by the fact that in 2021 Armenia was the frontrunner from all six states regarding *Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Freedom of Assembly and Association* sub-category (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). At the same time, we cannot claim that this boost was done with the purpose of reaching a high level of European Integration, since Armenia is part of the Eurasian Union and still depends on the Russian Federation regarding Nagorno–Karabakh, but we cannot exclude the results either. At the same time it is worth mentioning that external funding is allowed for CSOs, thus creating a certain degree of independence from the state. Thus, although dependent from a security point of view to Russia, Armenia proves able to reach a rather positive level of European Integration increasing its freedom scores, as it will be seen further.

Figure 2. Civil society in Armenia-Approximation domain 2015–2021

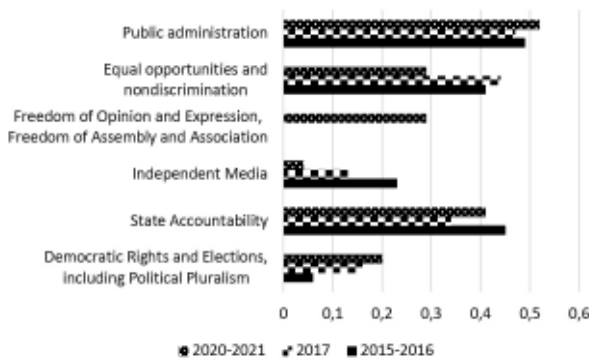


Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023.

Speaking about the efficiency of the CSOs from Armenia especially during the Nagorno-Karabakh war, the general trend was a rather positive one. One of the main reasons for their efficiency was represented by the availability of foreign donors to adapt to the dynamics from the ground, by adjusting their programs to the needs of the society (Komm–Zamejc–Terzi 2021: 11). More than that, the CSOs even cooperated with their peers from Azerbaijan, when the official communication channels were frozen, in specific and sensitive issues like prisons of war exchanges, the situations of civilians that were caught in the war zones, etc. (Komm–Zamejc–Terzi 2021: 17), proving a high level of adaptability and a general positive path into which Armenia embarked.

Azerbaijan. If in the previous case we could acknowledge a rather robust and active civil society, in this case, by looking at the results and comparing the two subcategories, we can claim that in Azerbaijan objectively the civil society has a very limited role. Also with a score of 0.04 regarding the *Independent media* in 2021, we can say that practically there is no free media in this state. The only sub-category where Azerbaijan reached the median line in 2021 is the *Public Administration* one by scoring 0.52 showing a strong public administration sector (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum).

Figure 3. Civil society in Azerbaijan-Approximation domain 2015–2021.



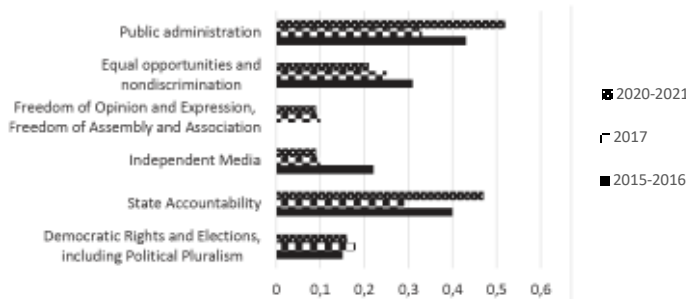
Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023.

Analysing specifically the period of 2020–2021 when the war occurred, we can notice a rather low level of European Integration with no noticeable positive changes (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum) that were generated by the conflict with Armenia. Rather than that, having arrested the activists that criticized the war (Freedom House 2021) and not allowing NGOs' access to foreign funding (Guluzade–Rzayev 2022: 5), we could claim that Azerbaijan is on a rather negative path towards its European integration. Thus, the chart confirms the political strategy that Azerbaijan adopted, by not allying with the West, nor the East.

Unfortunately, the war served as an opportunity for the government to adopt domestic measures that affect the core principles of a democratic country, fact that affects its freedom as will be seen in the following chapter.

Belarus. In the case of this country, we can notice a rather similar situation with that from Azerbaijan, the main difference being that Belarus has a strategic political economic and military partnership with the Russian Federation, also being part of the Eurasian Union. Reaching the score of 0.15 to 0.16 regarding the *Democratic rights and elections* we can pinpoint towards a rather non-democratic state, with practical no *Independent Media* (0.09 in 2021) and no *Freedom of Expression and Assembly* (0.09 in 2021). For a civil society to be able to function properly, it needs the suitable legal framework, which is not the case. The only sub-category where Belarus reaches the median line is represented by *Public Administration* (0.52 in 2021) as it is the case of Azerbaijan. Regarding State accountability it scored only 0.47 (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum) confirming Human Rights Watch report from 2021 according to which “*Belarusian security forces arbitrarily detained thousands of people and subjected hundreds to torture and other ill-treatment in an attempt to stifle the protests*” (Human Rights Watch 2021). At the same time these abuses were met with even more public outrage, as “*tens of thousands continued to demonstrate peacefully for fair elections and justice for abuses*” (Human Rights Watch 2021) highlighting the beginning steps of an active formal and informal civil society. All in all, realistically speaking, we cannot discuss about a European path for this state in the foreseeable future given the development level of its civil society, thus its non-democratic system. This position is reinforced by the sanctions that the EU imposed against it for its contribution in the Ukrainian war. It is worth mentioning that these were a deepening of the already existing sanctions that were in place starting with 2020 due to the governmental actions against civilians that were previously mentioned (European Council, Council of European Union 2023a). Last, but not least, in July 2021 Belarus was suspended from participating to the EaP programme (European Council, Council of European Union 2023b), cutting all the official channels regarding its European integration.

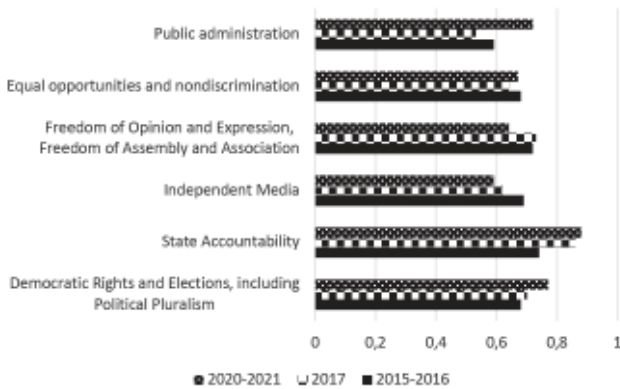
Figure 4. Civil society in Belarus-Approximation domain 2015–2021.



Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023

Georgia. Although it was the frontrunner from all six states regarding the *State Accountability* in 2021 with a score of 0.88, the government from Tbilisi registered a regressive path regarding the *Independence of Media* (from 0.69 in 2015 to 0.59 in 2021) and *Freedom of Expression and Assembly* (from 0.72 in 2015 to 0.64 in 2021), aspects that are quintessential for a functioning civil society in any democratic state. At the same time we can notice a slightly increase regarding the other sub-categories, especially Public Administration (from 0.59 in 2015 to 0.72 in 2021) and State Accountability (from 0.74 in 2015 to 0.88 in 2021) highlighting a stronger and stronger public sector (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). Comparing 2011–2014 with 2015–2021 periods of time, as it is the case of the Republic of Moldova (analysed below), we can notice a more nuanced and fluctuating conclusion regarding the European integration path of Georgia in what concerns the civil society development. This fact was officially noticed by the EU decision makers in 2022 when they decided to refuse Georgia’s proposal to become a candidate country, aspect that will be analysed in the following chapter.

Figure 5. Civil society in Georgia Approximation domain 2015–2021.



Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023.

The Republic of Moldova. Although it started as a frontrunner in terms of civil society participation (2011–2014), over the years, the authorities from Chisinau had a fluctuating behaviour regarding Moldova’s integration process. This pattern was possible due to the fragmentation of the Moldavian society that was reflected in the strategies of ruling parties and the presidential platforms. Another argument that can explain the differences between 2011–2014 period of time and 2015–2021 one is the 2014–2015 fraud scandal regarding 1 billion USD which ended up in EU temporarily freezing its aid (Reuters 2020). We could say that the Republic of Moldova is a classic example of why the EaP Index needed to be reformed and to add

these inter-sectorial domains and more specific indicators. If in 2014 it scored 1 out of 1 for the participation of civil society, for the period of 2015–2021 the dynamics are more nuanced. Regarding *State Accountability* (from 0.83 in 2015 to 0.73 in 2021) and *Independent media* (from 0.64 in 2015 to 0.55 in 2021), Moldova faced a slightly regressive path. Regarding the other sub-categories, as it can be seen below, it had a more constant behaviour, especially regarding the *Democratic Rights and Elections* (0.72, 0.71, and 0.7) and *Equal opportunities and Non-discrimination* (0.79, 0.68, and 0.76) levels. The only positive trend that was registered the one referring to *Freedom and Expression* where it went from 0.7 in 2015 till 0.83 in 2021 indicating a more active and vocal civil society (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum).

Figure 6. Civil society in Moldova Approximation domain 2015–2021.



Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023.

Ukraine. As the biggest immediate neighbour of the EU after the Russian Federation, Ukraine has a major geopolitical importance for both Brussels and Moscow. This argument is proven also for the analysed period of time, especially starting with 2014 when the Ukrainian crisis erupted. Analysing the chosen sub-categories, Kiev situates itself in a both progressive and regressive pattern. Firstly it scored positive results regarding the *Democratic rights* (from 0.59 in 2015 to 0.78 in 2021 being the second after Armenia), *State Accountability* (from 0.74 in 2015 to 0.86 in 201 being the second after Georgia) and *Public administration* (from 0.59 in 2015 to 0.72 in 2021 being the first along with Georgia), demonstrating a more robust and resilient, democratic public sector. On the other side, it scored negatively regarding *Independent media* (from 0.63 in 2015 to 0.54 in 2021), *Freedom of opinion* (from 0.85 in 2015 to 0.66 in 2021) and *Equal opportunities and Non-discrimination* (from 0.75 in 2015 to 0.67 in 2021) (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). Thus, although some generic democratic rights were protected, in terms of measures taken to protect the vulnerable groups or regarding the framework that the state

must create in order to ensure a safe and free space for expression, Ukraine was on a regressive path, aspects that will be highlighted later on by the international community especially regarding the rights of minorities (Denber 2022). At the same time, as it will be seen in the following chapter, in 2022 the Ukrainian civil society became more and more involved in the country's affairs especially in what concerns its European integration.

Figure 7. Civil society in Ukraine – Approximation domain 2015–2021.

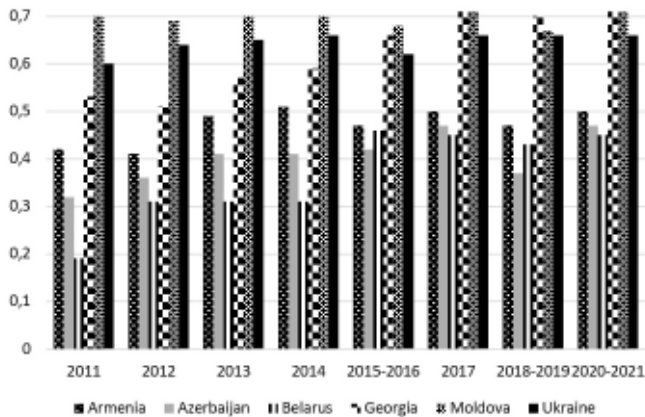


Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023.

Making a cross-analysis over all six states for the 2015–2021 period of time in relative terms (thus without taking into consideration the numbers, but the trends at the macro level) we can notice that, although not reaching very high scores for all, Armenia was the single country that was on a progressive path for all six sub-categories. As previously mentioned, it occupied the first place regarding *Democratic rights and Freedom of Opinion, Expression, Assembly and Association* registering the highest scores, almost doubling them from 0.43/0.46 in 2015, to 0.84/0.84 in 2021, reaching the highest level of increase. Also it was the only partner state that was on a positive pattern regarding the *Independent Media* sub-category although in absolute terms it did not score a very high value (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). These aspects are even more important since Armenia was perceived as being on the losing side regarding Nagorno–Karabakh war from the autumn of 2020. Also, faced with a national security problem, the civil society from this state, although criticized, proved to be active and resilient in a wartime situation (Komm–Zamejč–Terzi 2021: 13). At the same time, Moldova and Azerbaijan were the only partner states that were on a positive pattern regarding Public Administration, but scored a regressive behaviour regarding *State accountability*, although the general trend should be vice-versa. On the other hand, Belarus was the only country where the *Democratic rights* were limited and Ukraine and Georgia were the only ones where the *Freedom of opinion* has decreased (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum).

In terms of the interactions between the governments, CSOs, business sector and citizens in the partner countries and the EU member states, we can notice below that Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine passed the median line, proving a good European integration level regarding the Linkage domain. Moldova tended to be the most constant partner fluctuating between 0.68 and 0.71 (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum), fact that proved a rather stable relationship between the actors, with minor setbacks during Igor Dodon’s presidency. The partner states that registered the highest increase is Georgia going from a score of 0.51–0.53 in 2011–2012 to 0.71 in 2021. On the other side, Ukraine tended to be more constant fluctuating between 0.6 and 0.66. Starting with 2017 it entered on a stable dynamic scoring the same, 0.66, proving its pro-European view (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). This behaviour can be seen also as a reaction to the Russian actions starting with 2014, the annexation of Crimea, the Ukrainian reaction taking the form of the Euromaidan, etc. Regarding Armenia and Azerbaijan, the numbers prove that the war did not affect the links between the players, as they even increased from 2018–2019 (pre-war) to 2020–2021 (post-war).

Figure 8. Linkage dimension 2011–2021 behavioural patterns



Source: Analysis developed by the authors based on the data collected from Eastern Partnership Indexes conducted by Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum available online <https://eap-csf.eu/>, accessed 4 January 2023.

On the other hand, as a result of the criticism brought over time and the conclusions of the meeting of foreign ministers in May 2016, the European Commission together with the European External Action Service launched in 2017 the 20 deliverables that should have been achieved by 2020. These can be grouped into four priority areas and three inter-sectoral priorities that refer to: stronger civil society involvement, gender equality and non-discrimination and strengthening strategic communication, supporting pluralism and media independence (European Council, Council of the European Union 2017).

In 2018 (EUforBusiness 2018), 2019 (European Council, Council of the European Union 2020) and 2020 (EU Neighbours East 2020), the European Commission launched the progress monitoring reports on these 20 deliverables. Regarding the main differences between the Index and the 20 deliverables, we must mention the following aspects: in the case of the Index, the emphasis falls on the expressed achievements of each partner state separately on a scale from 0 to 1, 0 being the minimum and 1 being the maximum. In the case of deliverables, the focus is no longer on the score of each individual state, but on the 20 deliverables, thus tangible results, even using examples. Then, the Commission no longer uses the scale, but rather focuses on the objectives achieved and those that still require effort and time to be achieved. As a conclusion for the three analysed years, in February 2020 the Commission labelled the cross cutting deliverable *More engagement with civil-society organisations* "on track" with progress registered from 2016 (EU Neighbours East 2020: 12) highlighting the following results: all six countries implemented capacity building projects, there were more than 60 fellowship projects that were granted to more than 200 persons, there was implemented a pilot instrument that can be used in order to monitor the civil society in all EaP states and the EU increased its engagement level towards the Civil Society Forum having the aim to improve the policy dialogue level (EU Neighbours East 2020: 2).

Therefore, between 2011 and 2021 the general macro trend was pretty much maintained, the front runners (Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova) generally maintaining their positions. Analysing in a more in-depth way we notice the development of the Armenian civil society in comparison with the three mentioned above that are, either constant, or regressing, although Armenia passed through a wartime situation. At the same time, we should highlight the general relative constant scores of Ukraine (the exception being the subcategories Freedom of Opinion, Expression, Assembly and Association, Independent Media and Equal opportunities and non-discrimination), although starting from 2014 it dealt with huge security problems due to the Russian actions.

2022-a game changer?

2022 brought the European continent in front of yet another war (the largest armed conflict since World War II). Besides the hard security concerns, the civil society from all six states were put under pressure due to the instable situation from Ukraine.

At the same time, the war presented itself with an unprecedented opportunity in terms of European integration. Three of the six EaP states applied to the EU for a candidate status: Moldova, Ukraine and Georgia. As the numbers are showing above, they were the most prepared and willing ones from all six. Although Georgia has a rather similar development regarding the civil society, when it officially applied for obtaining the status of a candidate country to the EU, the

European decision-makers did not grant it with this status as it was in the case of Moldova and Ukraine. The reasons behind the decision were related more to the reforms that the Georgian government still needs to implement regarding the human rights, rule of law and a process of “*de-oligarchisation*” (Liboreiro 2022). This opinion is backed by the Freedom House 2022 results, labelling Georgia as a partly free country with a score of 58 out of 100 (decreasing from a score of 60 in 2021) (Freedom House 2022a). It is worth mentioning that for the same year Moldova obtained a score of 62/100 (increasing from 61 in 2021) (Freedom House 2022b) and Ukraine 61/100 (increasing from 60 in 2021) (Freedom House 2022c). Although we can identify a rather high level of integration regarding the development of CSOs as it was analysed and also an economic integration through the AA and the DCFTA (European Council, Council of European Union 2023b), this was not enough in order to grant it with EU candidate status. At the same time, generally speaking, the quality of being a candidate country does not automatically mean an already high level of integration or that once a candidate a state it will become for sure a member state, nor does it mean that a state does not have to make changes. For example, Ukraine, among others, is highly criticised for breaches regarding human rights, especially minorities ones (European Parliament 2018), as even the Indexes proved. Generally speaking, a candidate country should prove an increased level of European integration, but over the years we witnessed situations in which a candidate state chose for several reasons that are not within the scope of this paper to draw away from the Copenhagen criteria (EU-Lex 2023), thus to embark in a regressive integration process. This is the case of Turkey, a state that has a candidate status since 1999 (European Commission 2023). Even after the accession, the integration process continues since it is an ongoing process as the EU is far from being a static organization. Last, but not least, we should not exclude the fact that granting a state with the candidate status is also a political act that is decided by all EU member states in unanimity.

Analysing specifically the case of Ukraine, since it is a part of the Ukrainian-Russian war, in terms of civil society development, we can notice that the more aggressive Russia has been over the years, the more active the CSOs have become and the 2022 war was no exception. At the same time we have to distinguish between the formal civil society and the informal one. The formal CSOs like think tanks involved themselves in the geopolitical aspects of war, pushing towards a deeper European integration, by supporting the liberal, pro-democratic reforms, women’s rights, local governmental accountability, etc., as they see the European path as a viable alternative to the subservice Russian actions against the very core of Ukraine as a state. There are 184 Ukrainian organizations that are registered within the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum proving their interest and involvement. This trend was noticeable also by analysing the charts from above. Even more importantly, starting with 2019, “Ukraine’s pro-European society and European integration course have been included in the country’s constitution, making it easier for Ukraine’s stakeholders to push through reforms when they have a European

label attached” (Zarembó 2022: 56). Concretely, “*Ukrainian CSOs cooperated with the EU to build an anticorruption infrastructure through institutions like the National Anticorruption Bureau, the Specialized Anticorruption Prosecutor’s Office, the National Agency on Corruption Prevention, the State Bureau of Investigation, and the High Anticorruption Court*”(Zarembó 2022: 56).

Even in the case of Ukraine’s candidacy to the European Union, the civil society played a very important role. In July 2022 approximately 200 organisations from Ukraine signed a petition for the EU in order to grant Ukraine a candidate status. Even more, they advocated at the EU’s level, they helped the Ukrainian policy makers in drafting the European Commission questionnaire. Even more importantly, their actions were not singular, but, rather than that, bidirectional, as the government from Kiev asked their help in the application process. At the same time, the CSOs kept being involved in the domestic affairs also. For example they maintained their criticism towards the government relating to the corruption accusations. Taking into consideration the pre-2014 internal division between East and West, we have to mention also the pro-Russian CSOs, but after February 2022 they remained a minority (Zarembó 2022: 56–57).

In what regards the informal Ukrainian civil society, it supports the European path of Ukraine, adding a new pro-European integration level to the already existing ones. In terms of tangible actions, according to the polls approximately 80% of the population was involved in defending their country through: volunteering, financial contribution, and information resistance, work in defending and maintaining the critical infrastructure or being part of the military personnel (Rating Group 2022).

All in all, given the crises it has been going through, Ukraine proved a robust and active civil society that helped the country in its integration process. This does not mean that we should bypass the regress that was visible regarding the media independence, freedom of expression and equal opportunities and non-discrimination. Rather than that, these scores give Ukraine the clear image towards the actions it needs to take in order to increase its European integration level.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to assess the involvement/development of civil society in the European integration process of all six EaP partner countries putting a special emphasis on the crises situations, namely the 2020 Nagorno–Karabakh war and the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian war. In order to reach this objective, we have conducted a longitudinal comparative analysis over 2011–2022 period of time on specific items that we have chosen. The primal source that we have used was represented by the EaP Index and for the 2022 period of time other international Indexes that deal with the involvement and development of civil society. From the EaP Index we have selected a limited number of domains (Management, Approxi-

mation and Linkage) that have a direct connection with the topic of our research. Since from the start we have positioned ourselves in the framework according to which without a strong civil society, we cannot have a democratic state, we have also analysed the Freedom Index scores for all states. In terms of results, we cannot claim that civil society tends to be stronger during wartime situations, although both Armenia and Ukraine proved to be under this category. The reasons that lays behind our conclusion is the case study of Azerbaijan, where the CSOs and activists faced setbacks regarding their rights and liberties in 2020 and 2021. Regarding the European Integration process, it is confirmed that the stronger the civil society is, the deeper the European integration is. We could argue that to a certain degree Armenia could be the exception, since it registered high scores regarding the Approximation domain. A possible explanation in this case could be that due to hard security concerns, it tends to cooperate more with the Russian Federation rather than the EU since it cannot balance Azerbaijan by itself. At the same time, this strategic choice is captured by the Linkage domain scores, where it scored only 0.4-0.5 out of 1 for the examined period of time (Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum). Since Yerevan tends to be on a positive trend it remains to be seen which would be its future strategies.

Last, but not least, generally speaking, the formal/ informal civil society proved to have crucial roles especially under wartime situations in both analysed events, especially in Ukraine where they even had a tangible role in the candidacy of Ukraine to the EU. Also, it is confirmed that the higher the involvement of civil society is in a state, the higher is the score regarding its democratic principles.

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Notes

¹ In 2004: Czech Republic, Cyprus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia and in 2007: Romania and Bulgaria. For more information please check: European Council, Council of European Union (2023c) Enlargement <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/enlargement/> accessed on 9 January 2023.

² "Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy" Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy, Vladimir Putin, 10 February 2007. For the entire speech please access: <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034> accessed on 9 January 2023.

³ It encompasses 16 partner countries like: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, North Macedonia, Palestine, Syria (until 2011), Tunisia and Turkey. For more information please access Union for the Mediterranean <https://ufmsecretariat.org/> accessed on 9 January 2023.

⁴ It encompasses six Eastern European countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Belarus, the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine. For more information, please access European Council, Council of European Union (2023) Eastern Partnership <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eastern-partnership/> accessed on 9 January 2023.



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